

About the Artist: Greg Semu

Independent indigenous researcher, curator, and artist Greg Semu was born in Aotearoa/New Zealand in 1971. He embraces Sāmoa as his ancestral and spiritual home, and his artistic practice often begins in the Vā (the space between) and draws from the vast Ocean that unites rather than divides. Semu's artworks start with research and community engagement. Semu uses the visual language of photography, sound, and film to explore the significance of identity and create evocative dialogues to challenge the romanticized colonialist documentation of "first contact." In 2007, as the first artist in residence at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, he created the *Noble Savage* series. These photographic paintings reenact moments that are both historically and art historically significant. Using mediums synonymous with truth and reality, Semu's photographs seduce the viewer to challenge preconceived notions of history and culture.

In 2010, Semu and Lalau Leo Tanoi, creative producer of Pacific programs at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre in Sydney, collaborated with the National Rugby League (NRL) to produce a calendar to celebrate the Pacific Islands heritage of NRL players, using customary adornments loaned from Todd Barlin of Oceanic Arts Australia and contemporary works made by Sydney-based Māori artist Niwhai Tupaea. The series of photographs presented throughout this issue eventuated in the *Body on the Line* exhibition. Semu is careful to acknowledge that he is not attributing chiefly status to the players. Rather the artist and players pay tribute to the strength they derive from their ancestors and cultural heritage by incorporating items from a selection of loaned artifacts.



One Knight in Shining Armour.
Greg Semu, autoportrait
(cropped), 2007.

Semu lives in Sydney. He is represented by Alcaston Gallery in Melbourne and his photographs are included in private and public collections worldwide.

BEVERLY KNIGHT
Alcaston Gallery

The art featured in this issue can be viewed in full color in the online versions.



Self-portrait with Side of Pe'a, Sentinel Road, Herne Bay,
by Greg Semu. 2012.

Digital C-type print, edition of 10, 100 x 72 cm. Image courtesy of Greg Semu and the Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne.

Covering Semu's body from midriff to knees, Samoan tatau (tattoo) is a complex icon of Samoan identity. In 1994, Semu underwent the rite of passage receiving tatau that signify his genealogy and Samoan traditions. In 1995, his first triptych photographic self-portraits led to the exhibition *O le Tatau Sāmoa*, and the Auckland Art Gallery commissioned Semu to revisit the series in 2012, as seen here.



Roy Asotasi, by Greg Semu. 2010.

Digital C-type print, edition of 10, 100 x 72 cm. Image courtesy of Greg Semu and the Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne.

Roy Asotasi wears his Samoan heritage like battle armor in the form of intricate tattoos and a family ula (garland). The to'oto'o (wooden staff) he clutches symbolizes authority reserved for matai (chiefs), as does the fue (fly whisk), which is normally worn over the left shoulder to denote tulafale (orator chief) status.

Roy Asotasi currently plays for the Warrington Wolves. In 2013, he captained Sāmoa in their test match against Tonga.



Petero Civoniceva, by Greg Semu. 2010.

Digital C-type print, edition of 10, 100 x 72 cm. Image courtesy of Greg Semu and the Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne.

Fijian Petero Civoniceva is adorned in cassowary feathers, pig tusk chest plate, and Papua New Guinean and Fijian tapa held by a belt of dogteeth; he holds a Fijian war club. By combining items from many parts of Oceania, Semu and the players celebrate the diversity of Pacific Islands heritage throughout the National Rugby League. Semu feels that the various adornments visually acknowledge the spiritual origins of the players' collective ancestors.

In 2009, Civoniceva became the first forward to play forty international tournaments for Australia, and he represented Fiji in the Rugby League World Cup in 2013.



Dene Halatau, by Greg Semu. 2010.

Digital C-type print, edition of 10, 100 x 72 cm. Image courtesy of Greg Semu and the Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne.

Like many of the other National Rugby League players, Dene Halatau wears tattoos representing his Niuean ancestry like armor. The stylized spearhead tattoo on his arm represents the warrior's courage to fight. Semu observed that the athlete's wearing of the shell chest plate, fiber armband, and skirt seemed to bring the ornaments to life.

Halatau plays for the Wests Tigers and is known for his commitment to community work.



Frank Puletua, by Greg Semu. 2010.

Digital C-type print, edition of 10, 100 x 72 cm. Image courtesy of Greg Semu and the Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne.

Strength and masculinity are essential for Frank Puletua's role as caretaker, exemplified here as he cradles his son Noah. Puletua is tattooed with a stylized sun to represent leadership surrounded by spearheads, symbolizing the warrior—important qualities for fatherhood and sportsmanship. Lalau Leo Tanoi, who was the creative director of the *Body on the Line* exhibition at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, noted that Puletua's participation with his son emphasized the future for Pacific youth.



Nigel Vagana, by Greg Semu. 2010.

Digital C-type print, edition of 10, 100 x 72 cm. Image courtesy of Greg Semu and the Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne.

Contemplative, in a reserved while defensive stance, Samoan Nigel Vagana is adorned with an armband from the eastern highlands of Papua New Guinea, ngatu (Tongan tapa), and a Fijian war axe. This portrait is reflective of Vagana's current position as the National Rugby League education and welfare manager, a position he took after retiring from the playing field. He advocates life balance, social responsibility, and ethical decision making.



Jared Waerea-Hargreaves, by Greg Semu. 2010.

Digital C-type print, edition of 10, 100 x 72 cm. Image courtesy of Greg Semu and the Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne.

Jared Waerea-Hargreaves holds a conch shell trumpet, ready to call for action. He wears a piupiu (reed skirt) to signify his Māori heritage. Semu chose to accentuate the players' modern tattoos that combine customary motifs with fantasy, such as Jared's shark tooth design representing power, ferocity, and adaptability—traits associated with athletes and warriors.

Waerea-Hargreaves plays for the Sydney Roosters and in 2012 won the Te Arawa Senior Sportsman of the Year and the Jack Gibson Medal.



Paul Aiton, by Greg Semu. 2010.

Digital C-type print, edition of 10, 100 x 72 cm.

Image courtesy of Greg Semu and the Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne.

Paul Aiton wears the garb of his Papua New Guinean homeland. The dogteeth ornaments keep with Sepik tradition of displaying teeth of deceased pets as a show of wealth. The culture of football or rugby is embedded in the psyche of young Papua New Guinean warriors. Semu draws from that passion and pride to transform the elite athletes into cultural warriors in these photographs.

Aiton captained Papua New Guinea in the Four Nations tournament in 2010.



Fuihui Moimoi, by Greg Semu. 2010.

Digital C-type print, edition of 10, 100 x 72 cm. Image courtesy of Greg Semu and the Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne.

Tongan-born Fuihui Moimoi is regarded as a favorite by fans of his team, the Parramatta Eels. Here his status is signified with the to'oto'o (Samoan orator's staff). Moimoi wears a Melanesian grass skirt and shell armband, complemented by a contemporary coconut shell collar made by Sydney-based Māori artist Niwhai Tupaea.

In 2013, Moimoi played for Tonga in their test match against Sāmoa.



Nathan Cayless, by Greg Semu. 2010.

Digital C-type print, edition of 10, 100 x 72 cm. Image courtesy of Greg Semu and the Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne.

In an approach similar to those used in portraits of the other retired players, Semu captures Australian-born Nathan Cayless in a reflective pose with only a suggestion of holding a club. A draped piupiu and ornate coconut shell collar by Māori artist Niwhai Tupaea pay tribute to Cayless's Māori ancestry. This warrior has taken on a new mission since retiring in 2010: he is an ambassador for Rugby League's One Community, an initiative aimed to use Rugby League to make a positive difference in people's lives. Nathan participated in relief efforts in Christchurch after the 2011 earthquakes.



Jarryd Hayne, by Greg Semu. 2010.

Digital C-type print, edition of 10, 100 x 72 cm. Image courtesy of Greg Semu and the Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne.

Jarryd Hayne, Australian-born of Fijian descent, wears the chiefly tabua (sperm whale tooth necklace) and clutches a Fijian war club to symbolize the importance of his cultural identity, a theme close to Semu's heart.

Hayne is the Parramatta Eels' cocaptain and has represented New South Wales in the State of Origin series, and Australia and Fiji in international rugby league tournaments.



Michael Jennings, by Greg Semu. 2010.

Digital C-type print, edition of 10, 100 x 72 cm. Image courtesy of Greg Semu and the Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne.

Australian-born Tongan Michael Jennings wears tapa cloth, layered with a cassowary feather headdress worn as a belt, and a dramatic contemporary shell necklace by Niwhai Tupaea. Lalau Leo Tanoi, creative director of the *Body on the Line* exhibition at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, expressed the hope that the impressive stances of Jennings and the other athletes inspire others to explore and reevaluate their own cultural heritage.

Jennings plays for the Sydney Roosters, and in 2013 he was named to the Kangaroos 24-man World Cup squad.